Names in Popular Sayings

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THE ACTIVE INTEREST in human nomenclature, its origin, meaning and history has been reflected in an evergrowing store of popular writings. Considering the wealth and scope of this literature, we must wonder why only scant attention has been paid to the many relevant insights that may be gained from an investigation of the widely current use of personal names in proverbs and popular sayings. The patent disregard for this interesting field of investigation cannot be attributed to a paucity of source material but rather to a neglect of proper collecting. The most cursory perusal of any proverb collection will yield a ready and bountiful harvest of pertinent sayings, containing personal names in a great variety of pattern and meaning. However, such random samplings are of no great value to the study of names. Only methodic compilation, based on a diligent search through the tomes of proverb collections, will provide a reliable foundation for an authoritative discussion of the wealth of proverb lore that has been linked to many names.

Depending on emphasis and method, an examination of sayings relating to personal names will prove productive from several points of view. The analysis of their content will throw new light on the diverse and interesting connotations with which the common man has invested so many names. The study of their style will demonstrate a correlation between certain proverb patterns and the proverbial use of names. The evaluation of the quantitative yield with regard to specific names will provide valid evidence of their regional popularity in a historical perspective, evidence which in turn may be related to specific causative factors. The impact of history, of human fame or infamy, is found in the curious and often quite unexpected manner in which names from history or

legend have caught popular fancy and persist in proverbial allusion. Occasionally the reference to a name may prove to be our only clue to the meaning of an obsolete proverb and enable us to establish its place and time of origin.

The assiduous collector of pertinent sayings may wisely choose to limit his collection to proverbial references to a single name. Professor Wayland D. Hand has given us an excellent example of the fruitfulness of such a highly selective approach in his comprehensive investigation of words and idioms which are traditionally associated with Judas Iscariot. Analogous limitations to instances of the use of personal names in such specific proverb patterns, as rhymes or puns on names, or alliterative formations should prove equally rewarding. Any collector who attempts to gain a wider perspective and who embarks on an all-inclusive compilation will soon find himself confronted with the difficult problem of finding a feasible arrangement for the analysis of countless sayings that differ widely in content and style.

To list all pertinent sayings alphabetically by name is one practical solution which has the obvious advantage of being very convenient for ready reference. However, this conventional arrangement fails to bring into focus one of the most important distinctions in the discussion of the proverbial use of names, i.e. the essential difference between proverb lore that alludes either directly or indirectly to the name of a specific character from history or legend and, on the other hand, the anomalous multitude of sayings in which personal names appear in a non-allusive sense to represent the concept of man or woman in general. The expediency of limiting one's collection to a single language is equally inadequate because it does not account for numerous instances of international currency. In view of these difficulties it seems advisable to limit comparative studies in this field to groups of sayings which can be clearly defined and circumscribed by some common characteristic.

The investigation of proverbs which pertain to names of individuals is particularly rewarding. Proverbs of this type are manifestly of earlier origin and of a wider regional distribution than the non-allusive sayings and lend themselves quite readily to meaningful groupings. There is, for instance, an abundance of allusions

to Biblical characters. These allusions reveal or confirm many of the traditional beliefs which have been associated with some of the popular figures from both the New and the Old Testament. In a broader sense they also delineate some of the sources and the general scope of the common man's familiarity with the Scriptures. We may note, for example, the early origin and widespread currency of numerous proverbs that refer to Adam and Eve to attest that the dramatic narrative of the creation of man, of his temptation and fateful punishment, has never lost its deep symbolic meaning to mankind. The connotation of moral frailty which has been linked to the appellation *the old Adam* lends a deeper meaning to the widely current proverb *We are all Adam's children* as well as to its recent satiric expansion *We are all Adam's children, but silk makes the difference.* Similar allusions to the same connotation may be found in German, e.g. *Der alte Adam lebt noch* (Old Adam is still alive); *Der alte Adam guckt heraus* (Old Adam peeks out); *Nach dem alten Adam schmeckt jeder* (Every one has a touch of old Adam). Another German proverb *Alle Frauen sind Evastöchter* (All women are daughters of Eve) shows that analogous allusions to Eve are marked by similar innuendoes.

Proverbs linking Adam's name to that of Eve lend themselves readily to the creation of types employing the rhetorical device of parallelism or contrast. An early and widely known example of this type is the English rhyme *When Adam delved and Eve span, where was then the gentleman?* This extremely popular proverb was originally a part of a defiant revolutionary song. We know that it was used as early as 1381 by John Ball as the theme for his famous sermon on the equality of man and we can trace its rapid spread across the sea into Holland, Germany and the Scandinavian countries in the course of the following century. One of the reasons for its widespread currency in the Germanic languages lies without doubt in the ease with which the rhymed pattern of the English prototype could be imitated in these related tongues, e.g. in Dutch *Wie was die edelman, doe Adam groef ende Eve span* (*ca.* 1460); in Swedish *Ho was tha een ädela man, tha Adam groff ok eua span* (1476); in Early New High German *Da Adam reütet vnd Eva span, wer was die Zeit da ein Edelman* (1493). Closely related variants in the Romance and Slavic languages show, however, that linguistic bar-

riers were no obstacles to the expression of the ideal of human equality in the simple words of this old adage.

Numerous allusions to Biblical characters in the form of proverbial comparison illustrate another type of popular saying which becomes meaningful only through a common cognizance of the Biblical connotations of the names involved. Sayings like *As wise as Solomon* and *As old as Methuselah* have been current since the Middle Ages. Biblical accounts of exemplary virtue inspired comparisons like *As modest as Judith; As obedient as Rebecca* and *As chaste as Susanna.* The concepts of misery and patient suffering have long been linked to the names of Job and Lazarus in *As patient as Job* and *As poor as Lazarus.*

An interesting transposition of reference appears in the well-known saying *To rob Peter to pay Paul.* In England this phrase is commonly regarded as a historical allusion to the repair of St. Paul's Cathedral done at the expense of St. Peter's at Westminster during the reign of Edward VI. However, the assumption of this particular reference becomes quite untenable in the light of much earlier documentations of a medieval Latin equivalent *Non est spoliandus Petrus, ut vestiatur Paulus* as well as in view of widely current vernacular parallels on the Continent where any allusion to a local English event would have been completely meaningless. A German variant *Man muss nicht St. Peters Altar berauben, um St. Paulus zu bedecken* (One must not rob St. Peter's altar to cover St. Paul's) offers a clue to a more likely explanation which links our saying to the religious custom of decorating the respective altar of every saint on his special day. Normally this was done by transferring a special set of decorations from altar to altar. Since the Saint's day of St. Peter coincided with that of St. Paul, it often was impossible to grace the altar of one without baring the other.

The fervent cult of the saints during the late Middle Ages proved extremely productive of sayings that base their metaphoric content on a general knowledge of the lives of these venerated men and women. Legendary accounts of their miraculous deeds and harsh tribulations were familiar to the common people, who in proverbial allusion paid unwitting tribute to their saintly virtues. Almost all the extant sayings of this type prove to be mere continuations or variations of the great wealth of proverb lore relating

to saints that was current in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In Catholic countries we may still note an unmistakable correlation between the popularity of a particular cult and the yield and dissemination of relevant allusions. This explains, for instance, the abundance of French sayings which refer to the colorful legends about St. Martin, bishop of Tours and patron saint of France.

The dearth of similar sayings in Protestant regions is quite noticeable. We may safely charge it to the iconoclastic zeal of the early days of the Reformation, which apparently discouraged even the most innocuous expressions of apostasy. Among the few surviving English allusions to the name of a saint, we find some curious references to St. Anthony, as patron saint of the swineherds, in the sayings *As fat as St. Anthony's pig* and *He will follow him like St. Anthony's pig.* The latter is still used to scorn obsequious behavior. Both sayings were originally inspired by the familiar sight of "St. Anthony's pigs" in the streets of Old London, where the proctors of St. Anthony's Hospital had been granted the privilege of letting their swine feed on public land. Homage to St. George, the patron saint of England, is paid in the expressions *As bright as St. George* and *St. George to boot.* The facetious simile *Like St. George who is always on horseback and never rides* was obviously inspired by the familiar sight of countless statues and pictures of St. George as a heroic warrior.

The number of proverbial allusions to historical characters other than saints is surprisingly small. Apparently the great of the past were so quickly forgotten by burgher and peasant that any reference to them soon lost its meaning. Popular ascriptions that assign many sayings to definite characters are therefore frequently open to question. The seeming reference to Alexander the Great in *If Alexander were a cook, all the world would know it* becomes somewhat questionable when we note that this is evidently a less suggestive variant of a proverb which is widely current in German and Spanish and reads in literal translation "If Alexander were a cuckold, God and all the world would know it" (*Wenn Alexander ein Hahnreih ist, so weiss es Gott und alle Welt; Si Alejandro es cornudo, sepalo Dios y todo el mundo*). The more specific allusion of the continental version lends some weight to a conjecture that re-

lates this proverb to a certain Alexander Pheseo, governor of Thessaly, who according to long forgotten accounts was murdered by his own wife when he took extreme measures to curb her notorious infidelity. Allusions to characters from English history are equally uncertain. The proverb *King Harry loved a man* is supposed to derive its ironic connotation from the reputation of Henry VIII for wanton greed and selfishness. We have yet to find a plausible explanation for the jocular use of *This was a hill in King Harry's day* or for the old Sussex saying *My Lord Baldwin is dead,* which was used in an ironic sense to let people know that their news was already commonplace knowledge. The early currency of the proverbial comparison *As bold as Beauchamp* suggests that it may have been prompted by the numerous accounts of the chivalrous pursuits of Richard de Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick (1382–1439), yet later periods were prone to regard it as an allusion to the fame of other, contemporary bearers of this illustrious name.

A typical example of a proverbial allusion which is no longer linked to any specific character is our well-known expression *Let George do it.* In American usage it is commonly associated with the appellative use of this name for a Pullman porter. Yet we are told that Louis XII used to express his confidence in George d'Amboise, his minister of state, by saying: "Laissez faire à Georges, il est homme d'âge." In spite of the striking sameness of expression, we find ourselves hard pressed to explain why the French phrase was allegedly translated and so widely adopted by the American people.

These instances are but a few of many that could be cited to illustrate the difficulties in the search for the origin and meaning of proverb in which the allusion to a name is no longer understood. Our success in tracing these references to definite historical or legendary characters depends not only on the patient search through authoritative works on history, legend, or superstition but also to a large degree on the grace of fortuitous discovery.

The proverbial use of personal names in a general, non-allusive sense, as in *All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy* is of comparatively recent origin. First documented at the close of the fifteenth century, these sayings about Dick, Tom, and Harry have become increasingly popular and in the case of names like Jack or

John extremely productive. Instances of international currency are rare and invariably limited to closely related language groups. The popular character of these sayings accounts for a general tendency to use abbreviated forms like Dick, Tom, or Bess in preference to the full name. The brevity of these pet forms also conforms with a natural inclination to make proverbs short and concise. The use of these names in the generic sense of man or woman is, on the whole, much less common than their endowment with specific connotative values.

The historic development of the proverbial use of names in a general, non-allusive sense clearly reflects the relative popularity of the names involved. Ultimately we must attribute the vogue of certain names to explicit factors like the missionary zeal with which the Medieval Church promoted the use of names from the Calendar of Saints or the ancient custom of naming children after the ruler of the land. To illustrate the correlation between the vogue of a name and its proverbial use we only need to point to the abundance of proverbs in every Western tongue which contain the name of John in one of its many variant forms. Being not only the name of the Baptist and of Christ's favorite disciple, but also that of 23 popes and of no less than 994 saints, this name has outranked all other Christian names for more than half a millennium.

The connotations, that are attached to names, generally strike a disparaging note. In English we may note this early instance of the use of Jack, the curious English pet for John, in sayings like *Jack would be a gentleman if he had money* or *Jack would be a gentleman if he could speak French,* dating from the close of the fifteenth century. Another early example of more pronounced disparagement may be found in the use of Malkin, an obsolete diminutive form of Maud, in the sixteenth-century proverb *You cannot love both at once the mistress and Malkin, her maid.* Being used at this stage as a stock name for a servant girl, Malkin subsequently deteriorated in meaning to the point where it became a synonym for harlot.

Popular delight in rhyme and alliteration inspired the creation of sayings like *Jack shall have his Gill; If Jack's in love, he is no judge of Jill's beauty; There is a silly Jock for every silly Jenny;*

There is not so bad a Gill, but there is a bad Will. Such juxtapositions of the names of the opposite sexes permit many variations of parallelism or of contrast in thought and stylistic structure.

Within the narrow compass of this brief discussion, the few examples cited can offer merely a glimpse of an abundance of challenging materials for fruitful investigation. In addition to the use of names in proverbial sayings, one should also mention their use in mocking rhymes, in weather rules and in magic formulae, i.e. in curses or invocations. There can be no question that the methodic search and the critical analysis of these neglected fields of research will yield some notable contributions to name research.

A *Dictionary of American Surnames* will be published in the near future by Harper & Brothers. This will consist of approximately six thousand surnames with nationality and a brief explanation of their origin. A study of various large city telephone directories has been made to insure the inclusion of all the more popular surnames.

The nationality of the person bearing a particular surname will be designated rather than the language from which the name was derived. For example, there will be the entry: "SMITH (Eng.), The worker in metals." As a surname, Smith is English, derived from an Anglo-Saxon word. Of course Smith is also a popular name in Scotland and Ireland, but it is impractical to allot sufficient space to tell all about the name.

I hope that this will be the forerunner of a really comprehensive and scholarly dictionary of surnames which will include the surnames of all nationalities. An attempt is being made to include the surnames of the members of the American Name Society. If any members have any special information concerning the nationality and meaning of their surnames, or other surnames, I hope that they will send the information addressed to me at 322 Sherman Avenue, Evanston, Illinois, to reach me before December 15, 1955.

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